

Fort Donelson

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Battlefield
Tennessee and Kentucky



General Grant at Fort Donelson, from the painting by Paul Philippoteaux.

COURTESY CHICAGO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

From Henry to Donelson

Bells rang jubilantly throughout the North at the news, but they were silent in Dixie. The cause: the fall of Fort Donelson in February 1862. It was the North's first major victory of the Civil War, opening the way into the very heartland of the Confederacy. Just a month before, the Confederates had seemed invincible. A stalemate had existed since the Southern victories at First Manassas and Wilson's Creek in the summer of 1861. Attempts to break the Confederate western defense line, which extended from southwest Missouri and the Indian Territory to the Appalachian Mountains, had achieved little success. A reconnaissance in January convinced the Union command that the most vulnerable places in that line were Forts Henry and Donelson, earthen works guarding the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers.

Fort Henry stood on land ill-suited for forts. It was surrounded by higher ground and subject to flooding. The Confederates had begun a supporting work, Fort Heiman, on the bluffs across the river, but it was not finished. A joint army/navy operation against Fort Henry had been agreed to by Flag Officer Andrew H. Foote and an obscure brigadier general named Ulysses S. Grant. The attack was to take place in early February, using the Tennessee River for transport and supply. It would be the first test of Foote's ironclad gunboats. On February 4, 1862, Grant began transporting his army south from Paducah, Ky. He established a camp north of Fort Henry and spent two days preparing for the attack.

On February 6, while Grant's soldiers marched overland from their camp downstream, Foote's gunboats slowly approached Fort Henry. These included newly constructed ironclads *Cincinnati*, *Carondelet*, and *St. Louis*, as well as the converted ironclad *Essex*. They opened a hot fire that quickly convinced Lloyd Tilghman, the

Confederate commander, that he could not hold out for long. The plan called for the gunboats to engage the fort until the army could surround it. The bombardment raged for over an hour, with the ironclads taking heavy blows and suffering many casualties. Most of the casualties came after a Confederate shell ruptured the boiler aboard *Essex*, scalding its commander and killing many of its crew.

The poorly located fort, however, was no match for the gunboats. To Grant's chagrin, the Confederates evacuated Fort Heiman and the ironclads pounded Fort Henry into sub-

mission before his soldiers, plodding over muddy roads, could reach the vicinity. Less than a hundred of the Confederate garrison surrendered, including Tilghman; the rest, almost 2,500 men, escaped to Fort Donelson, Grant's next objective, a dozen miles away on the Cumberland River.

At Donelson the Confederates had a much stronger position. Two river batteries, mounting 12 heavy guns, effectively controlled the Cumberland. An outer defense line, built largely by reinforcements sent in after Fort Henry fell, stretched along high ground from Hickman Creek to the little town of Dover. Within the fort Confederate infantry and artillerymen huddled in the cabins against the winter. Aside from a measles epidemic, they lived "quite comfortably," cooking their own meals, fighting snowball battles, working on the fortifications, drilling, and talking about home—until the grim reality of war descended on them.

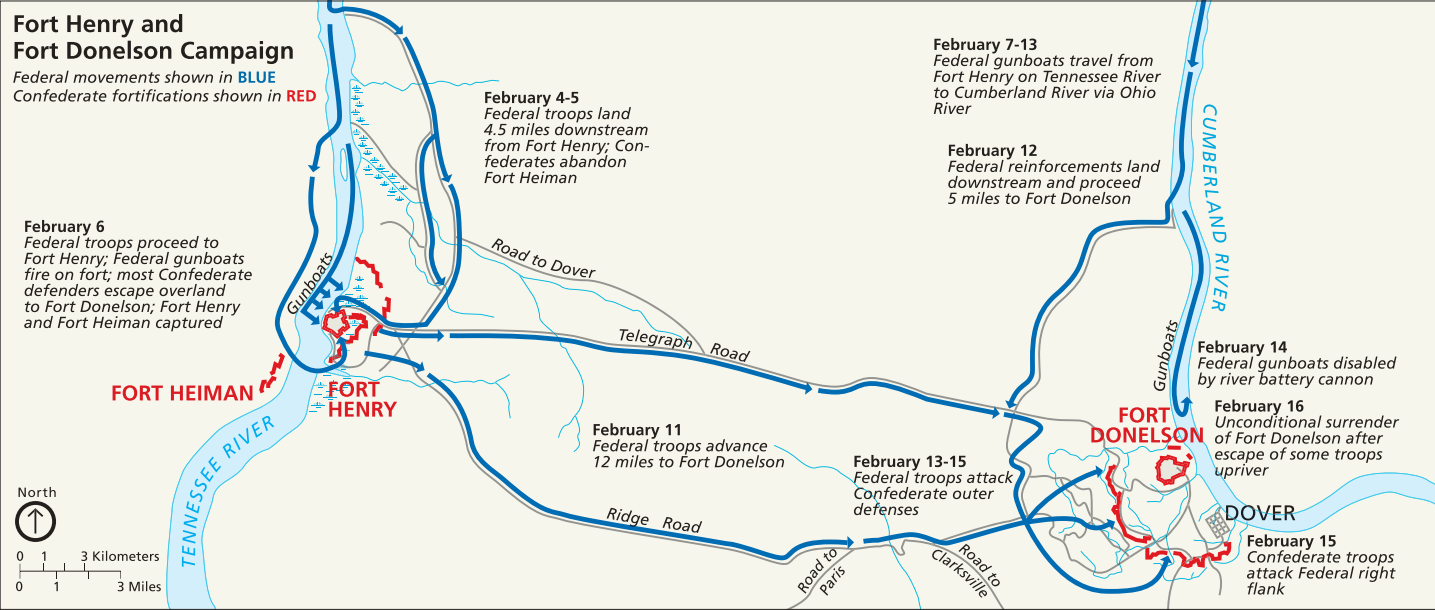
It took Grant longer than expected to start his men toward Donelson. Several days passed before Fort Henry was secure and his troops ready to march. They finally got underway on February 11. By then the weather had turned unseasonably warm. Lacking discipline and leadership and believing that the temperature was typical of the South in February, many of the soldiers cast aside their heavy winter gear—an act they soon regretted. The Confederates were so busy strengthening their position that they allowed Grant's army to march unchecked from Fort Henry to Fort Donelson. By February 13 some 15,000 Union troops nearly encircled the outerworks of Fort Donelson. Sporadic clashes broke out that day without either side gaining ground. Nightfall brought bitter weather—lashing sleet and snow that caused great suffering.



Flag Officer Andrew H. Foote presided over Union naval operations on the upper Mississippi River and its tributaries and oversaw construction of the nation's first squadron of ironclad gunboats. His role in the capture of Fort Henry and in the joint army/navy attack on Fort Donelson helped win him promotion to rear admiral.



Brig. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant commanded the Federal Military District of Cairo at the time the Henry-Donelson campaign took place. Until January 1862, when his plan to attack the Confederate river forts was approved, he had fought only one battle, a brief and inconclusive engagement at Belmont, Mo., in November 1861.



"No terms except an unconditional and immediate surrender can be accepted."
Ulysses S. Grant, February 16, 1862

The Battle of Fort Donelson

February 14 dawned cold and quiet. Early in the afternoon a furious roar broke the stillness, and the earth began to shake. Foote's gunboat fleet, consisting of the ironclads *St. Louis*, *Pittsburg*, *Louisville*, and *Carondelet*, and the timberclads *Conestoga* and *Tyler*, had arrived from Fort Henry via the Tennessee and Ohio rivers and were exchanging "iron valentines" with the 12 big guns in the Confederate river batteries. During this 90-minute duel, the Confederates wounded Foote and inflicted such extensive damage upon the gunboats that they were forced to retreat. The hills and hollows echoed with cheers from the Southern soldiers.

The Confederate generals—John Floyd, Gideon Pillow, and Simon Buckner—also rejoiced; but sober reflection revealed another danger. Grant was receiving reinforcements daily and had extended his right flank almost to Lick Creek beyond Dover to complete the encirclement of the Southerners. If the Confederates did not move quickly, they would be starved into submission. Accordingly, hoping to clear a route to Nashville and safety, they massed their troops against the Union right and began a breakout attempt on February 15. The battle raged all morning, the Union army grudgingly retreating step by step.

Just as it seemed the way was clear, the Southern troops were ordered to return to their entrenchments—a result of confusion and indecision among the Confederate commanders. Grant immediately launched a vigorous counterattack, retaking most of the lost ground and gaining new positions as well. The way of escape was closed once more.

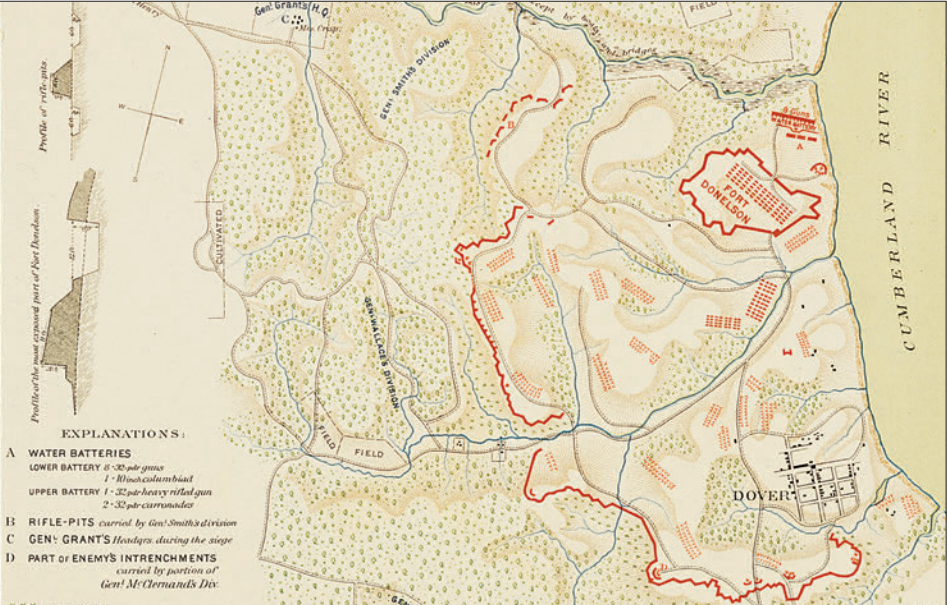
Floyd and Pillow turned over command of Fort Donelson to Buckner and slipped away to Nashville with about 2,000 men. Others followed cavalryman Lt. Col. Nathan Bedford Forrest across swollen Lick Creek. That morning, February 16, Buckner asked Grant for terms of surrender. Grant's answer was short and direct: "No terms except an unconditional and immediate surrender can be accepted." Buckner, who considered Grant's demand "ungenerous and unchivalrous," surrendered.

Soon after the surrender, civilians and relief agencies rushed to assist the Union army. The U.S. Sanitary Commission was one of the first to provide food, medical supplies, and hospital ships to transport the wounded. Many civilians came in search of loved ones or to offer support. Although not officially recognized a

nurses, women like Mary Ann Bickerdyke cared for and comforted sick and wounded soldiers.

With the capture of Forts Henry and Donelson, the North had not only won its first great victory but gained a new hero—Ulysses "Unconditional Surrender" Grant, who was promoted to major general. Subsequent victories at Shiloh, Vicksburg, and Chattanooga would lead to his appointment as lieutenant general and commander of all Union armies. And Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox would help put Grant in the White House.

After the fall of Fort Donelson, the South was forced to give up southern Kentucky and much of Middle and West Tennessee. The Tennessee and Cumberland rivers, and railroads in the area, became vital Federal supply lines. Nashville, a major rail hub and previously one of the most important Confederate arms manufacturing centers, was developed into a huge supply depot for the western Union armies. The heartland of the Confederacy was open, and Federal forces would press on until the Union became a fact once again.



Plan of Fort Donelson, from *Atlas to Accompany the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*

John B. Floyd (top), politician turned Confederate general, took charge of Fort Donelson shortly before the siege began. As his situation worsened, he turned command over to **Brig. Gen. Gideon J. Pillow** (center), and escaped upriver to Nashville. Floyd wanted to avoid capture, fearing arrest in the North for allegedly transferring arms to southern arsenals while secretary of war in the Buchanan administration. Pillow also chose escape over capture and gave command to **Brig. Gen. Simon B. Buckner** (bottom), a former West Point classmate of Grant's, who would stay and share the fate of his men.

